

Asia Pacific Media Educator

| Issue 18

Article 10

12-2007

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Recommended Citation

Little, J. and Sankey, M., Teaching narrative journalism and the APN Professional Development Program, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 18, 2007, 113-123.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss18/10>

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Teaching narrative journalism and the APN Professional Development Program

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Abstract

This paper extends the familiar concept of 'journalism-as-storytelling' into a description of some of its practical applications in a university and industry partnership resulting in a commercial training arrangement in early 2007. It describes the APN/USQ Professional Development Program for newspaper employees (with no formal journalism qualification) and exemplifies how print journalism courses may be adapted to teach narrative writing techniques. It demonstrates how foundation skills in journalistic practice may be incorporated into an adapted teaching model, suggesting that "the basics" of narrative writing should not be thought of as discrete components of journalism education. This argument is further supported by the description of a robust pedagogical approach informed by Mezirows' transformative learning theory for a cross-disciplinary knowledge base.

Introduction

In the project described here the authors focussed on facilitating students' awareness of how stories work in print as a way of developing the students' ability to find their own stories and make good decisions about writing. Two books applying a similar pedagogical premise to journalism education were published this year: *Good writing for journalists* (Phillips, 2007) and *The Writer's Reader: Understanding journalism and non-fiction* (Eisenuth & McDonald, 2007). The central teaching tool in both these books is a set of published feature stories, with commentary on style and/or structure pointing out writing techniques to achieve reader interest.

Similar tools have been used as a component of a multimedia-enhanced course environment, designed by the authors for a third-year print journalism course at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). The success of this course created the opportunity to offer a creative solution to Australian Provincial Newspapers (APN) for training their early career and cadet journalists who had no prior formal training in journalism. This led to a commercial partnership between USQ and APN to deliver basic journalism training to APN employees, on the job.

This paper outlines the rationale and structure of the APN/USQ program and highlights how this approach differs from other forms of university based journalism training. It then places this approach to learning and teaching within a theoretical framework and provides some examples of how this was achieved in both a university based course and in the APN/USQ professional development program (PDP). In conclusion, this paper provides some recommendations for how this approach could be applied to other contexts.

The APN Professional Development Program

The University of Southern Queensland is a dual-mode institution with triple-option teaching modes (on-campus, distance education, and online) specialising in flexible delivery. It is currently the second largest distance education provider in Australia, with 75% of its students studying in this mode and with almost 90 nationalities being represented among the student body. At USQ, as with many other institutions in Australia, distance education course materials have traditionally been delivered via static print-based packages. However, advances in technology and the greater use of multimedia in education have provided an opportunity for course leaders and designers to enrich students' learning experiences by providing multimedia and online learning resources (Sankey, 2006). This change in delivery mode has made it possible to offer many more options to organisations, such as APN, who have staff spread all over the country. However, in taking this approach teaching teams have had to look closely at the pedagogy underlying this type of course delivery, considering the most appropriate use of the technologies and not just using the online environment as an information dumping ground.

Each course in the program described here provides links to story case studies from APN's stable of publications and to other newspaper sites. The technology enables the mode of learning-by-comparison and reflection. Material is scaffolded upward in terms of skill and comprehension using audio and visual links to external media providers.

Curriculum design began by using traditional course content (lectures, writing exercises, information-gathering activities) in new media formats (e.g. Breeze presentations, or PowerPoint with audio). As with the redesign of the third-year print journalism course, links were used not just to take students to sites of further enquiry, (eg. the extensive bodies of information, at The Poynter Institute and the Dart Centre) but to anchor learning activities such as formulating approaches to interviews and photographic treatment of stories. This helps focus the students' experience of journalism as a broad-based practice with ethical implications arising out of professional decision-making in daily newsroom work.

Similar to the work-integrated journalism education initiative in the Philippines (Valdez, Escaler, & Hofilena, 2004), the APN/USQ PDP was devised based on a short-course, online delivery model. The program differs from the Philippines model, however, in that the APN/USQ program has four, half-credit point courses, written and designed specifically for APN's needs. Key factors facilitating this level of responsiveness and the subsequent commercial partnership between APN and USQ were:

Synergy between APN's "R1 Program", which emphasises reader engagement through storytelling for specifically identified reader targets, and curricular moves toward a stronger emphasis on critical thinking and writing in USQ's print journalism courses.

The authors' collective experience in regional newspaper journalism, literary studies, and multimedia education design.

USQ's flexibility in accrediting a specially crafted program for APN, leading to credit for two standard university journalism courses as well as to a certificate of successful completion of the training program.

APN's willingness to invest in full fee-paying, work-based editorial training, for an initial 11 staff, through 2007.

The program is housed within the School of Humanities and Communication in the Faculty of Arts at USQ's Toowoomba campus. It is examined and administered by three staff (the authors and a Research Assistant) who also administer a combination of three online learning environments; a program website (<http://www.usq.edu.au/apnusq/>) that links to a program wiki used for student collaboration and communication, and the course materials site housing all four courses.

The program started in February 2007 with online courses for newspaper employees in regional Queensland and New South Wales.¹ It provides beginning journalists with work-integrated training compacted into 44 weeks (10 weeks per course) of self-directed study suitable for non-graduates of tertiary journalism.

Why this program is different

Significant drops in newspaper circulation in some regional daily and non-daily mastheads since the early 1990s (Ewart, 2005), not isolated to APN or Australia, meant industry was compelled to find more complex causes for the drop than merely internet use and generational trends. People had not only stopped reading newspapers

but, in Western capitalist countries such as Australia and the USA, they had not actually started (Knightley, 2003; Cokley, 2005).

APN's Readers First (R1) readership development program was in part a bid to address the causes of declining readership. R1, implemented across titles and through regular in-house training of journalists, is based on "Five Principles, Eight Practices"² that sought to change the stories told in regional newspapers. The circulation lift in some APN titles in the past few years (Ewart, 2005) seems to point to a better fit between content aimed at specific readers of each regional newspaper, and sustained reader engagement. The R1 Principles and Practices direct journalists and newspaper production staff toward development of closer relationships with the local community and, consequently, newspaper readers. The common thread through the principles and practices is "people". Story ideas are developed and evaluated by their capacity to include, and connect with, "real people". By extension, the newspaper itself applies the principle of connecting with "real people" by seeking out community input on current, local issues and being seen to take a stand on such issues. This could be seen as a bid to revive the traditional role of the regional newspaper as a local identity in itself, and to do so by extending the "basics" of newsgathering to include newspaper content that involves readers in a sustained way.

The course schedule and structure takes into account APN's wish to provide employees with knowledge of "the basics" of journalism (or, a vocational skill set) but as a foundation for, rather than the end point of their journalistic development. Readers, according to APN's R1 principles, provide both the starting rationale and the final destination for each story. This principle is emphasised so strongly that newly installed editorial software requires journalists filing stories to identify the "reader target"³ for their copy before the system will accept their work. Readers are identified by psycho-demographic tags such as "Look-at-me", "Something Better", and "Real Conservatism"⁴ and then distinguished further by geographical region. Editorial walls are decorated with photographs and profiles of typical reader targets. R1 emphasises the central message that so far appears to be working in successfully lifting circulation for some APN mastheads: readers know best, so know your reader.

The redesign of the USQ print journalism capstone course JRN3001 in late 2005-early 2006 explored similar media changes and the implications for its teaching and learning approach. Its emphasis on feature writing allowed for extension beyond the vocationally preferred "inverted pyramid model" of news reporting in a curriculum which adopted narrative writing as its primary assessment strategy (Little, 2006). Significantly, it was the particular emphasis on the role of contemporary Web 2.0 technology in interactive, online writing communities that facilitated this approach to the teaching of narrative writing. The strategy is illustrated further below.

What students do in this program?

The following table summarises program content and course schedule for the APN program.

All courses are organised around reflective writing practice associated with students' daily work at their newspaper, and articulated through a purpose-designed program wiki, housing students' individual blogs. The central website is a

Table 1: APN PDP Structure

Course	Content Overview	Dates
APN7001 What's the story? Finding and using information	Sources, basic interview techniques, grammar, news sense, news values, story writing and reflection.	5 February – 20 April
APN7002 Boring to best	Narrative writing, intermediate interview techniques Local government rounds coverage Readers First (R1) principles and practices. Story writing and reflection	23 April – 6 July
APN7003 Human face, news space	Court reporting, contempt, defamation, writing court-based stories.	16 July – 28 September
APN7004 Journalism tool kit	Storytelling as a blended design concept. Sub-editing – headline writing, captions – photojournalism, building an R1 page.	1 October – 14 December

content-management system, rather than a learning management system. Using open-sourced Drupal software, the system allows for sections to be set up as wikis, blogs, and traditional discussion forums. Behind the use of this technology is the pedagogical imperative of reflective learning: students write progressively and responsively in a place where other participants gather, read, and think about journalism; they generate their own narrative – the story of their story-building.

All story assignments completed as part of the assessment portfolios for each course must be publishable by the student's employing newspaper. The use of blogging as an additional component of the assessment enables students to diarise, outline, and evaluate the story-writing assignments completed as part of their daily work at the newspaper. The reason blogs were used instead of, for instance, individual emails between the examiner and student, was to emphasise the community-learning model. As journalism is itself an essentially social, team-based activity, the approach to developing students' story-telling skills sought to develop an appreciation of this aspect of the profession. The blogs enable reflection and comment from other students, input from the examiner, and review by APN editorial executives. The students' commentaries and work samples provide, in effect, an open demonstration of the step-by-step processes in preparing and publishing stories. The blog activity also gives students responsibility for what appears in the online environment and thus aids the teaching and learning of ethical and communicative decision-making. What occurs is a collective kind of copy-tasting and editing, designed to engage fellow students in their work and connect their learning with the active work environment around them. Given that particular regional identities and regional readerships will influence process and content in their newspapers, it was important that students and teachers participated in this shared writing

environment as progressive, reflective learning and teaching practice. Elements such as

- a newsroom diary in APN7001,
- a research record and reflective posts on self-selected stories in APN7002,
- a court experience journal in APN7003, and
- a story mission statement in APN7004,

are built into an electronic portfolio-based assessment model.

According to (Looker, 2005, p.73), reflective journals can “help students to become more aware of their own learning processes, in particular, their learning processes in relation to the unfamiliar and apparently inaccessible”. What remains “inaccessible” in the vocational model of journalism education is the relational, social heart of journalism as storytelling. As we suggest above, the scaffolded activities based on reflection and sharing of work online assists students with developing an ability to listen and interpret the local voices that enliven such journalism. The activities and required reflective posts, completed during and after the finding and writing of stories for the student’s particular newspaper, are a way of building a deeper understanding of the parts of the craft that comprise the whole. For example, a student will expand their interviewing repertoire by identifying, in completed copy, the questions left unanswered for a reader. In building their capacity to write narrative, however, students can also identify when particular questions are better left unanswered in, for example, stories of local or legal sensitivity.

This new approach to journalism, according to the reader research undertaken by APN and according to some journalists and educators who teach narrative technique (Banaszynski, 2002; Collins, 2002; Phillips, 2007) depends on the capacity to find a voice that gives news resonance in readers’ lives. This is especially important for newspapers in regional Australia where metropolitan and national news often translates into markedly different local stories.

According to Collins (Collins, 2002:21):

Voice is one of the very first things that subconsciously readers respond to. And if it’s someone you want to be with, you’ll spend time with him, even if you’re not sure where the point of the piece is or where the piece is going or what the subject is even about. The seductive unfolding of an article could be a very quiet way that voice works on you. But it can also show up in a bare phrase or a single word or even a sentence.

The nuanced tone of a quote or the people-centred story behind the news is difficult for beginning journalists to understand, particularly if they are confined within a purely vocational, competency testing curriculum. Students may become so focussed on avoiding the slash of the red pen that they follow formula until their news sense, as well as their writing, becomes formulaic (Abrahamson, 1991:54; Banaszynski, 2002).

Students in both the APN/USQ PDP and the USQ third-year capstone course arrive at the critically reflective online communities with little experience of writing about

their journalism. The process of constructing the individual narratives is, therefore, a multi-layered means of offering students regular writing practice as they also work with sources, evaluate information, and test out their individual applications of “the basics” on fellow writers – and readers.

This work-integrated training experience enables them to write about their work and share in their blogs the hits and misses of actually doing the job. They can also process any anxieties they may have about “doing it right” or showing initiative. The beginning journalist develops a sense of their own competence and this often leads to the confidence to try new ideas or approaches. This is the type of experience that Mezirow labels “transformative learning”. He defines this as “the process of effecting change in a frame of reference” (1997:5). Thus, the risks students might perceive in challenging the frames of reference in place around writing as merely the way news is banged out in sharp and summary reports can be experienced as transformative. Mezirow continues:

We transform our frames of reference through critical reflection on the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind or points of view are based... We do not make transformative changes in the way we learn as long as what we learn fits comfortably in our existing frames of reference (Mezirow, 1997:7).

This approach sits comfortably with a general move by journalism educators to “focus...on teaching conceptual skills tailored to develop in students the aptitude to ‘think global but act local’” (Loo, 2005:208). Indeed, some of the teaching and learning objectives behind the tools and techniques described in this paper resonate with the recommendations of a 2004 international conference discussion on print media (ibid.). What the APN and JRN3001 curricula have set out to do is utilise students’ narrative writing as a conduit for articulation of the “before-and-after” stories of journalism training.

Program portfolios built on reflective writing about people, stories, and the everyday work of newsrooms builds individual and collective records. The education and training narratives constructed out of these records tell of journalists’ learning: learning to think through choices of angle, interview subjects, and narrative structure; learning to empathise with human subjects of news, and developing writing technique as they defend their choices from the reader’s perspective. What is new, then, in R1 and the APN PDP is not so new after all: journalism in the public interest and an artefact of record in which journalists are responsive to their communities of practice and social context.

Evaluation

Ultimately the test is whether the program is meeting the professional needs of the APN staff out in the field. The following qualitative data was gathered during an evaluation survey conducted in the second half of 2007 and provides some preliminary findings on student experiences of the APN PDP. Students (identified as APN1 to APN7) responded to a series of open-ended questions. Although the overall tone of the evaluation is positive what emerged from the data was that online course delivery could not be applied as a panacea for the challenges of distance and work-

based learners across the board. Students who are familiar and most comfortable with print environments tended to remain that way while working through the online courses.

When asked if they felt the course had catered for their employment needs or future prospects, all seven students agreed that it had. Five found that the materials had been 'very relevant and helpful' (APN1, 2, 4, 6 and 7), APN7 went as far as to say, "As a start up thing for journalism it is fantastic". Three students found them to be more relevant to future prospects than to their current work but this was regarded as good thing. In saying this there was a clear sense of APN taking some responsibility for the future welfare of their staff. For example APN6 said that it was good that "APN [was] looking for new leaders to come through...".

Five of the seven students found the online materials helpful and would like to see the same things done in other courses. They found the materials "easy to access" (APN2), "very effective" (APN4), "very good" (APN5). One student expanded on these comments:

"Fantastic and would be good to see in lots of courses. Good to be able to go back to the website as a resource. Have gone back to first couple of subjects; readings good for ideas and inspiration." (APN6)

Another student identified one of the main advantages of using online course materials that had undergirded the course design:

"Yes it helped me because quite often on those links it was either different viewpoints or went off in a little bit of a different fashion to the material presented, so it rounded things out." (APN7).

However two students found the online materials difficult, preferring print based materials. For one of these students it was because they "don't have a computer at home" (APN1) while the other just "found it quite difficult" (APN3).

The advantages and disadvantages mostly revolved around having the materials online verses having access to printed materials. APN4 saw that having the materials "available 24/7" online was a distinct advantage. APN6 agreed saying, the "advantages far outweigh the disadvantages. Easy don't have to worry about books, everything was in a structured step by step format where you couldn't really go wrong." APN7 also saw this as an advantage saying, "Loved having it online in that you had study schedule and material was there so could work ahead if I had an easy week. Loved having the responses online because I could save them, go back to them - wiki and the end of course assessment."

APN1 and APN2 felt that having the materials online was a disadvantage feeling they would have "kept up to pace" (APN1) had they been printed materials this was also due "to having to print out wads of stuff, as I don't like reading off a computer screen" (APN2). APN3 did not say whether this was an advantage or disadvantage just that they printed the materials. APN5 would have liked to have the materials supplied to them on a CD, rather than online.

Interestingly five of the seven students found the supply of additional multimedia materials to be just nice optional extras, rather than providing essential learning

material. Those who did find them helpful said that “it’s nice to hear a voice” (APN2) and because these media files had associated printable materials they were able to use these to “make sure I’d absorbed [the information] correctly” (APN4).

Reasons given for not finding the additional multimedia features helpful where, “I found printing the transcript out to read to be more my cup of tea.” (APN1), APN3 took a while to work out how to use them. APN5 Found that “most content just repeated from written material” while APN6 said that they were “a person who likes to read things- other people who learn better by being told things”. Finally APN7 said “when I clicked on the first few it was pretty much the material I could just read for myself. It just didn’t interest me, so I did not do the rest of them”.

Clearly this strategy does not suit every one and it will be important in future iterations to make it clear to students that they should be used by students wishing to gain aural reinforcement. It should be noted however that these features are added for that very reason: for students wishing to access the information in alternative ways. It should not be surprising that in a profession where reading and writing is a key emphasis, that these features are not prized as highly as in other disciplines.

Application to other contexts

The approach to teaching narrative journalism in the programs described above concentrates on reader engagement through the precise identification of a newspaper’s reading public. Because of this, journalism training for the on-the-job context can be shaped and modified for the specific needs of a partner media outlet – as with APN’s objective of integrating R1 into journalists’ storytelling practices. If the curriculum design and delivery is flexible, and adjusted to integrate with the publication needs and styles of employers, the tertiary-based programs can act as extensions of existing work-integrated training, as well as theory-practice education that is aware of journalism’s participation in an extended social and historical narrative.

The opportunities afforded by online media for multi-layered narrative writing – individual writing that builds into blogs, which build journalism communities, which in turn drive peer, and instructor assessment, that helps enhance the narrative potential of future stories – can be adapted to most undergraduate and graduate journalism courses using the portfolio-based assessment model. The portfolio model adjusts to a student’s developmental level and learning context. A first-year journalism student’s reflective blog posts about reading and media consumption can be maintained not only for personal comparison with later work but also as a form of collaboration portal, enabling participation by students and staff in other courses, disciplines, and campuses. In doing so, collegiality and co-operation are promoted while students and teachers in journalism are able to learn from each other in the practice of community writing itself. Traditionally, the lecturer responds on an individual basis to each student, but here the student has the opportunity to see the work, successes, and challenges of others – and learn what it is like to be part of a multiple-layered narrative that is itself journalism, as it records the learning of it.

Notes

- 1 A USQ Vice-Chancellor's Strategic Development Fund grant supported program and curriculum development in 2007.
- 2 Explained on the APN/USQ website: <http://www.usq.edu.au/apnusq/>
- 3 See R1 information under the "Information" tab at the program website.
- 4 Roy Morgan Values Segments <http://www.roymorgan.com/products/values-segments/values-segments.cfm> Accessed 26 August, 2007.

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